DISPARATE
MINDS
INTO THE REDLINE

Into the Redline

A *Disparate Minds* Halloween Special

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Beneath beneath it is beneath
Below the wood, below the streets, below our industry of abandonment
There it rests, sickly and malevolent,
Yearning its abyssal lust for pain
Below the dark slate
The grey decay
And black night
There it lies in rapturous hunger
I'm sorry I've forgotten everything
But our niche little corner
Industrial and dull
Forgive Me

—Elegy for the Disparate, Verse Three, 22/3/9/4.2/Acorn

"Into the Redline"
The Mystery Opens,
Little Deaths, What is Beneath,
Ruin Me, Ruin Me, Ruin Me,
Declination and the Unbeing

The corpse was mottled and wrinkled like a prune. It was swollen, puffy, and covered in salt, giving it a supernaturally pale complexion. The colour that had been drained from its skin lay around it in a pool of deep red blood, though the body was not stained. It was a chalk-white face and torso in a red pond. It looked wrong against the craggy stone.

Not meant to be here, Serena thought. *Not meant to be like this.*

The mine had been here for a few years now. It was fine employment for those who could get it — the gruff, hardworking type. Looking at the walls, Serena correctly assumed that there was nothing to be found down here but base metals. Bronze, iron. Avenue was never lucky enough to get anything fancier. Still — the mine felt like a has-been mine. Why'd they have to come down here?

Well. She knew why. There was a body.

Serena remembered the strange man that had let them down here — she couldn't possibly forget him, he kept popping back into her mind. He was an

old man with an old face — his moustache was bushy, but nonetheless straight enough to evoke Chaplin or even Hitler. His overalls were covered in the same salt — the limestone? — in whatever the white powder was. And he was wordless, at first. He had just known what they were here for.

"We found him in the mines," he had said eventually, as he led them downwards into the abyss.

The descending path was steep, and there was no railing, nothing to hold onto but the rock face itself. It was a *strict* rock face, too; tight, almost closing in. But they had managed.

Of course they had found him in the mines, Serena had thought. *Where else would they have found him? This was a stupid man.*

And of all days. It was almost gauche to see such a thing on Halloween Night.

The cave air was thick and dreary — though never damp. Serena had *thought* mines would be damp, but the place was frustratingly dry. And then they had made it to the place where the body was, and the man had said something unclear like "Eeeeeehh, hervugabitp," and receded into the shadowy caverns.

But that was a while ago.

They were just here now, and the sight of it was completely encompassing. They were in the pit; as deep as one could go.

They were here now.

"...Right." Wick sighed, then placed the lamp down on the rocky ground. It was hardly bright enough for the bleak nocturne of the cave. "So."

"The body." Serena nodded. "We've got to examine the body."

"Yes."

Neither of them wanted to say the next few words, to volunteer either themselves or the other for the duty that was to follow. The scent of rot, the

stink of decaying earth welled up from beneath them. It was a sour smell, and *strong* — Serena could taste it in the back of her throat.

She knelt closer to the corpse, and tentatively took some of the pebbles strewn across the cavern off its chest. The man's clothes tore themselves open, revealing his chest. She had hardly touched him. But now they could see.

A triangle had been carved deep into his chest. *Deep* into his chest. So deep you could probably lift out the triangular part, and see the shape where it used to be in his body, like some sort of preschooler's game. This was not something a knife had done; no blade could have done it, however advanced. No laser or sonic-stick. What, then? It was, to be sure, an unnaturally *neat* job. You could see the man's chest hair still remaining on the cut-out triangle. Hardly any damage to the skin was visible. Not even a little bruise.

"Shit," Wick sputtered out. "Oh my god." He tried not to get sick. It felt —

—it felt like the first time he'd ever seen a dead person. There had been a man across a restaurant when he was young who had just given out during the meal. The look in the blank eyes, it was the same. He'd not seen that look since.

This was a normal man. Had been. And now he looked so tiny. Wick wanted to run away.

"Poor guy," Serena said softly. "He must have been hurtin'."

Wick had done some medical stuff before. Like, vaguely. He had no clue how to examine a body, not really. He knew the words and the questions, from the police shows and stuff. If there'd been a coroner here, he'd have known what to ask. But what did *rigor mortis* actually, physically look like? Not a clue.

Being a scientist and a doctor were very different things.

And yet, out here in Avenue, that had been what had drawn Anthea to him, or at least part of it. He was a 'scientist'. There was some kind of a chance that he could make half an attempt at frontier medicine.

Bullshit. He wished he'd told her that right there and then, instead of acting like she'd given him some kind of compliment.

The corpse kept staring. Struck with another televisual reminiscence, he flicked the eyelids down with his fingers. Wasn't right, leaving them like that. Give the poor man rest. *To sleep, perchance to dream.*

"The others aren't comin'," Serena stated. "Anthea figures we'll do just fine down here."

There was a rattle from somewhere nearby.

"Who goes there?" Serena said, rising to her feet. She removed a handgun from her coat.

Wick was surprised she had one. It didn't make him feel very good about things.

Serena swerved in the dark, trying to follow the noise that wasn't there.

"Come *outta* there!" she hollered at the empty cave.

The triangle.

The triangle.

Beneath beneath it is beneath it descends and plummets and falls towards oblivion and we are below and we are wanting, wanting in our declination, underneath, lesser. Down in the cavernous depths, our dead cities lie.

"It's not there, Serena," Wick said. "There's nothing there."

And then there *really* wasn't, because they weren't there either. The cavern was empty; nothing but rocks.

* * *

She was acting stranger than usual, Todd thought, as he sat down in his usual seat and removed his crossword from his manilla folder. He could see her spiralling more and more lately. He was certain of it, Anthea was not doing well.

He had tried to bring it up to Terrance, who had looked at him with imperious eyes, not altogether different from Anthea's own.

"This is the witching season," Terrance had said. *"All Hallows' Eve draws near, and it is the time the world is thinnest. These are no mere pagan rites, boy, and you would do well to heed that."*

Todd had grown a little more irritated with Terrance of late. It was like he was *trying* to be Tim Burton.

His crossword was a cryptic. The best were. The more impenetrable a crossword was, the longer it lasted him. And the longer it lasted him, the more *satisfying* a solution was. There were other benefits too. Chiefly that crosswords were usually hard to get a hold of. May as well make the thing last.

But he couldn't give it the necessary attention today. 15 down was troubling him, sure, but his mind kept going to Anthea across the bar. Her hand was creeping up and down her arm in a disturbing pattern. Eventually she approached him.

"You are important," she said, taking a seat at his table.

He didn't know what to say.

"Thank y—" he began, but she interrupted him.

"You will not wish to thank me when I am finished," Anthea stated plainly. "We will begin with you telling me what you know."

Her expression was more than *steely* — it was as hard as diamond. She stared, daring him to flinch.

Todd wondered what to say. "I studied linguistics in college," he stated eventually, if only just to say *something*.

"You know nothing, then." Anthea flicked her leg outwards, placing her calves on a bar stool, then began to stretch. Vigorously. "This is good."

Todd would have asked why she was doing that, had he not realised just in the nick of time that it would only have reinforced her whole 'knowing

nothing' point. Having dodged the trap, he resolved to say something else — and, twenty seconds later, came to the conclusion that he didn't have anything else *to* say. The damned woman had only come up to him for a moment and, already, she had completely dominated the conversation.

"You must not misunderstand me, my Cassandra truth. This city blesses us with the gift of forgetting, and that is no bad thing. There are plenty of people who come here because they *must* forget, in order to live."

And plenty of people who wish they could, Todd nearly said, but he held his tongue. His past life hadn't been *bad*. He missed it, really. But it wasn't like he was going steady with anyone or anything… It wasn't like people back in Eton *missed* him.

"I *am* sorry to approach you, but they're…" She trailed off, unwilling to finish the sentence. "I need someone with your particular set of skills," Anthea muttered, removing her foot from the stool. "I need someone who knows nothing."

Todd could hardly believe the woman's impertinence. He was just trying to sit. He wasn't bothering anyone.

"Buzz off," he muttered.

The immaculate facade dropped immediately. "Lives are at stake," Anthea hissed. "It is imperative that you are not *sour*. Listen, listen close."

She stepped closer and closer to him, until her face was above his own, hanging with the omnipresence of a gargoyle. She was close enough to bite him. Her eyes had flared, and there was more makeup on her face, eyeshadow and blush caked on that Todd swore was not there before.

"I *wish,"* she said, all breathy and hushed, "that I could help them, but I *know,* and knowing shapes the world around us."

Todd felt oddly moved at the instability of the woman. She was desperate, and, in her own way, pleading. The confidence which had clung to her since she entered the room had dissipated completely.

"Serena's in danger…" she whimpered. "My little girl…"

Oh, Jesus. What was he meant to say to that? How could he possibly help? He was no one, he was pushing fifty, and sitting in a low quality bar. What the Hell did she want from him?

And why couldn't he just manage out a little "no"?

* * *

Particular set of skills my foot, Todd thought, standing at the entrance to the cave.

She had told him which mine to go to, where she had last heard from them. She had said nothing else. There were no instructions.

The entrance to the mine was fantastical in its stereotypical simplicity, a grey opening in a rock face, an indentation, a hole. He stepped forward cautiously, and then he stepped back.

Todd liked Serena, and didn't mind Wick, he supposed. But they were professionals. If they had been caught by bandits, dealers, or ne'er do wells, surely he'd be less successful in this than they would be.

This was *stupid*. This was really stupid. He should call someone. Leave this to the young people.

Not that there were police or anything. Not that they would even help.

Doubt's such a strange feeling.

The ground was gravelly; it made the sound of rolling pebbles as he knelt down into the rock face. Every now and then he would pass a stake, a beam of some sort, meant to keep the whole thing from caving in. But it was mostly rock, and not *interesting* rock, at that. He couldn't even tell if it was granite or something else; it just looked like stone.

To think people *went* down here, crawled into the heart of the earth. His back ached. This was not a place for him.

"Helluh," said the man with the gravelly voice and the long thick beard and the eyes like midnight. "It's not safe past this point."

"I shouldn't imagine it would be," Todd muttered. "You see, I'm being exceedingly stupid, and I don't think I'm going to let anyone tell me off for it."

The man with the gravelly voice and the long thick beard and the eyes like midnight… exhaled sharply through his nose, in mild amusement.

"Yuh speak mighty strange. Are yuh from here?"

"Eton," Todd said, slightly embarrassed at the sound of the word.

"Where's that?" the man grunted. "I ain't never heard of no place called Eton." A distant spark flickered in the depths of his eyes. "You one of them Brits?"

"Yes, I am," Todd said, and the man snickered, as if the sheer confirmation of his Englishness qualified as a joke.

The man chuckled. "A Brit in Avenue. Don't you got enough problems without crawling down mineshafts, pansy-boy?"

Todd was halfway through composing some scathing reply, something to do with the English at least having the self-control not to try and coup their own elected government, when it occurred to him that the man was probably the kind of chap who thought the coup would have been a very good thing indeed. In any event, something felt *off* about playing out those national status games in the depths of Avenue; the bearded man was only an American citizen in the most tangential of senses, and as for Todd — well.

"I'll be getting on," Todd said, and the man shrugged.

"Your funeral, pal."

* * *

It was lonely in the cavern as Todd crawled deeper, and it was getting warmer, too. Funny old world. Heat rose, everyone said, but you still died of heat exhaustion if you dug deep enough. Todd's usual button-up shirt's collar chafed at his neck as he clambered further down into the abyss.

What in the world was he meant to do?

It just seemed to go deeper.

Was this the right way?

Who knew?

The ground was rougher, now; the pebbles softly grinded against his shoes, and the handholds were like sandpaper. Perhaps worse.

He unbuttoned the collar of his shirt. Decency could go hang; he needed to cool down. Besides, there was no one there to look, was there?

Thank God for that, too. The shirt was getting dishevelled. What a pain. It was *vintage*. Not only would he look a right mess, he'd never get the thing looking *right* again, they never did that; and where would he find its like in this town?

He took his square out of his breast pocket and wiped the handkerchief against his brow, grateful for the meager relief.

There was one more thing. He hadn't noticed yet; it was such a subtle, gradual detail. And yet, infinitely more significant than the heat and the staleness and the roughness.

The walls were getting redder.

* * *

Cherry was behind the counter today. She was usually a customer, usually a regular at Debby's, but poor Debby hadn't been doing well since the trouble with his wife this September. She was trying to be a *friend*, not just a customer. Dammit, she was doing a friend a *favour*. She was being a good person. A *good* person. This was something everyone did. A normal job.

But behind the counter, she always felt even more indecent than when she walked the streets in lingerie. She felt judged, stared at. A stripper was a stripper, so long as they kept to that. But the instant a stripper started being a waitress at a respectable establishment, people *would* stare, at least those people who knew; and in a town like this, who didn't?

There, behind the counter, next to the cash register, clicking the buttons like an automaton — the worst thoughts she ever had came to her. It was always here she felt the worst. Couldn't she just go back to her pens?

You're doing the right thing, honey, she told herself. *You're doing the right thing.*

They stared at her, the Jack O'Lanterns, the ones she'd laid out by the wall.

The bell on the door ding-a-linged as a customer came in. It was Terrance. *Weird.* She never saw him here.

"Hey, Terry," she said, putting on her cheeriest customer-service voice. "Thought you had a shift at the bar right now."

Terrance grunted. He *always* had a shift at the bar — he *owned* the fucking thing.

"No one's there tonight," he said.

"Weird," said Cherry, removing a copy of the menu from the case and passing it to him. "You'd think the bar would be hopping, today of all days."

Terrance rubbed one of his teeth in the back of his throat. It was bugging him. But Cherry didn't notice.

"It usually is," he said, mournfully.

Cherry tried to remain cheerful despite the poor man's expression.

"There are less people in general, I think," she said as if it were light conversation. "D'you know why?"

"Not a clue," Terrance replied, but his eyes told a different story, and as she led him to a seat, Cherry's heart grew more and more tense.

* * *

Todd wished he had an umbrella. Little pebbles fell on his flat back as he crawled into the cave, and they sort of hurt. It was no longer quite so warm, but he still felt wrong. He wasn't sure. It was probably that.

It had been nothing short of amazing, the sheer *length* for which the tunnel stretched on and on. But he was nearing the end, he knew it. He could only

hope the end was where Serena and Wick were. He wanted to get out as fast as possible. This place was not where someone should be on Halloween Night. The dark auburn walls, the sharp, craggy bits which stuck out where you least expected… Even the supports, which should have been the bulwark of human civilisation against the primal, chthonic terror, only served to make the entire place feel like splinters. The place was artificial and organic all at once, and wrong, wrong, *wrong*.

It was lonely down here. In the corner, now, there stood a wheelbarrow, filled almost to the brim with gems — precious stones still caked in grime and gravel. The gems were beautiful, but the wheelbarrow had a rusted wheel, and it had not been moved in a long time.

Past that, he moved on. He could stand to his full height now, no longer having to crouch or crawl. It was *just* high enough that he could manage. *Tall Chap,* his father used to call him. His great lovely tall chap. It had made him feel like an army private; he never liked it in the least.

He unslouched, slow but steady, tentatively raising himself inch by inch — until he realised that the ceiling was high enough for him, and uncoiled his spine the rest of the way.

Ahead, Tood saw an alcove, where he spotted a series of mustard-coloured mining helmets, the cartoony kind with the big lamps. He nabbed one. He'd always wanted one of these things, really. Even if they didn't look all that fashionable, there was something adventurous about them. A bit Indiana Jones.

This was an *adventure*; he laughed at the thought. He had begun his first adventure. Now, wasn't that funny! For so many years he'd thought that adventures only happened in films and fairy-stories. Most of his time on Earth. Oh, there *had* been a distant age when the boy Todd had had every confidence that he would have an adventure someday; that was how the world worked, wasn't it? At about thirteen, that faith had faded. In the total timescale, he'd believed in adventures for a fraction of the time he'd spent scoffing at them.

And here he was, proving the preteen right. In any other circumstance, it would be an occasion for applause, for the wildest enthusiasm; he could have savoured this, pictured his own younger self seeing him now and cheering.

But people were in trouble. There was no time for fantasy.

* * *

We don't go to the Moon anymore, do we?

NASA's stopped sending things up there. It's just not a priority.

Maybe it's for the best. I mean, I don't think we're responsible enough these days. And what's there to even get? A bunch of Moon rocks, I suppose. Not sure it's worth it, we have that stuff in museums. I touched a Moon rock once, when I was young. I can't imagine how many people had touched that same rock. After a while, all that skin touching the same surface, the same dust — the same flakes of dead skin — to touch the rock must have been more like touching all of them, really.

Everyone says 'let's go to Mars'. It's not the same to me.

There's just so much hate brewing. Sometimes, I feel the only reason to go to the Moon now is to get away, to get away from it all, away from the bad, powerful people who want you locked up for being different. It's a desperate measure. To get as far as you can from a world that hates you. Yeah, maybe that's why you'd go to the Moon.

It's just a shame that it's all those bad men who run the rocket ships. A ticket to the sky, flying to a place outside greed and hate, and your oxygen is funded on blood money. It's like being a class traitor. Sort of. A little nobler than that, maybe. I still want to go.

It's so cynical, and depressing, the world that we're in right now. Whether it's this town, or… someplace else. And maybe I could complain, but — it'd just be more noise, really. There's already just too much noise.

I just feel so hopeless. Don't you?

* * *

The walls, after a while, were like ice, except they weren't made of it. They had the texture, the look of ice, and Todd had worried that the mine had led him down into some sort of glacier. But it hadn't. Everything was fine. It just

didn't feel right. Thinking it was glass was… an easy mistake to make; the walls had that translucent opaque ice-look that ice had, but they weren't cold to the touch. Perhaps the word was *crystalline*. But the edges were soft and rounded like ice; it wasn't a geode.

It was a damned odd thing to find. He was *certain* now that Serena and Wick had not come this way.

It *was* ice, it had to be. And *red* ice, too; translucent, yes, but red. Ruby red ice. Like blood before it dries and becomes all brown. He didn't know why he kept thinking about it being ice. The room was cold, certainly, but no more than an average room with an air-conditioner. It was funny how ideas stuck with you. He buttoned up the collar on his neck, and adjusted the mining helmet straight on his forehead. It wobbled, just a hair too big.

Funny thing about red, he thought to himself. *It's the strongest wavelength of light.* He remembered that from school. It was one of those things that teachers kept telling you.

The mitochondria is the powerhouse of the cell.

He was certain about that much. They'd said it constantly. How something could be a powerhouse of something else was far from clear to Todd, but the words were crisped, drilled into his mind like this mineshaft into the Earth's crust.

Bad metaphor. He thought of a hole bored neatly into his skull and shuddered — it was so lonely down here that his thoughts were running wild. Todd had once thought he liked being alone. He'd thought it was nice to be in the corner of some café where no one talked to you at all. Or in his old house listening to some Buddy Holly.

Not that he had a proper house anymore. He'd been staying in the Avenue motels lately. The smaller ones, the cheaper ones. Not the haunts, but — that area of the neighbourhood.

He didn't tell anyone about that.

He tried not to think about it, either.

Not to think about what he'd do when the money ran out, when there'd be no more crosswords.

It wasn't his fault he liked to look nice.

Maybe that was why he was so upset about the shirt.

It had been a *nice fucking shirt.*

"Hello?!" he called. "Is there anybody in here?"

His voice echoed:

In here.

In here.

In here.

"Rats," he muttered to himself, not because there were rats, but because he was very miffed and he'd rather not swear.

If he died, no one would find him down here.

But he couldn't bring himself to feel upset or worried about that. He didn't really care.

He straightened his back. Even in a cave, one mustn't slouch.

When they did find him, his back would be flat, like a line. Nice and neat.

Oh, what negative thoughts one got.

It is so dark here. It is a cave. A cavern. Layered in darkness like a poetic blanket.

He'd never written poetry. He wished he had, now, he wished he *had* written *some* poetry, some poignant little something they'd find when they went through his things. Something for the world to remember him by. No such luck; not a line. *One just doesn't have the time.*

There was a little Japanese hand-fan, sticking out, half-buried in the rocky gravel sand at his feet. He picked it up, ever so carefully. There was an intricate fragility to it. It was so soft — he thought of a fairy-tale princess, or perhaps a girl dressed as the same, enraptured with a game of pretend.

It was ashen, and smelled of yellow dust. No one had held it in a long, long time. What could have been disquieting instead held an elegant melancholy; the fan's embroidery sent him back many years to a flowery place. Holding it, he felt secure.

He would put it down eventually. *But not yet.*

The object had distracted him. Oh! What a strange thing, to be distracted.

There was a transistor radio on a beach — beach — no, *bench* in the corner. Ticking out its song of static. He could hardly bear to listen.

T - h h - e r — — - - - I—s— No —- - - - Pain — - - - —y- —- - — ou —- A r e - —- —- — — Re ce — din-g-g-g

He could barely make it out. What was that? Was it Pink Floyd?

You just can't tell these days.

How long had he been walking for? Where *was* this in the mine, exactly?

The radio was humming out the song as best as it could, like a sick man speaking in-between coughs. The radio wasn't enough. It might have been a good brand once, but it was useless now, out of date, and in its electric desperation, it seemed to know it.

As if there were such a thing as an up-to-date radio. Who listened to the *radio* anymore?

It continued to try and push out its song. But Todd was already walking away, looking for something more.

* * *

It was when he finally realised that he wouldn't locate Wick and Serena that he found the room. A gun was lying on the floor, together with a stethoscope and a hairband. And then, there was the corpse. Probably the one they'd come down here to investigate, Todd imagined.

He hadn't seen a corpse before. And here he was.

Here *it* was too, as unapologetically cadaverous a corpse as one could imagine.

Todd couldn't quite articulate how he felt about that. Whatever he was feeling, there wasn't actually very much of it, to the point he almost wished he minded a bit more. The body —

— the body had a triangle in it. *How very disturbing*, Todd thought numbly, well aware that he didn't feel all that disturbed. *It's like one of those true crime things.*

The ground was warm. He sat down and placed his beautiful fan on the ground beside him.

Sitting here was like being on a car seat warmer. It would have been very nice, in fact, had it not been for the roughness of the ground, the rock slate covered in dusty pebbles and shards. Exceedingly fine gravel, yes, each pebble quite tiny — but he could feel each and every sharp, little stone pricking his skin through the too-thin fabric of his trousers. He scarcely dared to admit to himself that it bothered him quite a bit more than the sight of the corpse.

What made it worse was this: he knew in his bones that waiting here was futile. The place was funereal — it was miserable, yes, but desperately quiet. He could sit here until he turned to dust, and still, nothing would *happen.*

Todd shrugged, overcome with his sense of aimlessness; a reflexive social cue, meant for him only. There was no one else to see it; there was no one, *no one here.*

For God's sake. How was he meant to come in and rescue people if they didn't even have the common decency to be around? He felt like the man who rushes to his door and finds only an empty driveway, the kids who rang the bell long gone.

Not, he thought distantly, that he had too clear an idea of how he'd have gone about rescuing Wick and Serena if he *had* found them.

And then he noticed it, half-buried in the dust, just as the fan had been in the other chamber — a very, very small notebook. Like a passport book. The

kind that was really only good for a few scribbles before you had to throw it out. *What a very odd thing to find down here.*

He dusted the book off, and flipped it open.

There, scrawled in blue with a thick blunt marker — and in bolded capitals, if you please — were the words 'UNDERSTANDING IS ERASURE'.

Great, that's ruddy helpful.

He *absolutely* knew what to do now, thank you very much.

He turned the page. This page was scribbled in a ballpoint pen, which had begun to run out of ink. 'SEEK TO UNKNOW,' it said in imperfect strokes. He flipped further through the pages, a little faster. 'RUIN ME, RUIN ME, RUIN ME,' a few of them demanded.

He closed the book.

It was best thought of as *cryptic*, which, as when one used that word to describe talking to Anthea, was just a more polite way of saying 'useless'.

"Found what you're looking for?" a gruff voice asked.

It was the right old bastard that had called him a pansy earlier.

Todd sighed, too weary to be surprised at the thought of having been followed this far down. "What do you want?"

"Nothin' much," the man muttered. "A million bucks wouldn't go amiss"

"Preaching to the choir, mate," Todd replied.

Talking to a man like that, down here, clad in a half-shredded shirt, his British accent was manners enough.

"Choir," the man repeated, as if remembering the word.

Todd looked at him properly — and was shocked to notice that his beard was completely different; now, it was a goatee, neatly-trimmed. As for the man, he looked sick. His face was almost puce.

"Are you quite all right?" Todd asked.

"I'm fine," the man said, solemnly. "Just need to lie down."

"No, I mean —" Todd began, but the man had crossed the room towards the body.

He stretched in exaltation, like a teacher beginning a rubbish yoga class, and turned around, kneeling backwards and twisting down until he was on the floor — until — until he was the body.

A red indentation began to carve itself open on his chest, which was now bare, and his skin began to mottle and rot.

The triangle opened. It did so of its own accord. The noise was horrific — this… squelching wet spray.

The man hadn't even been able to say something was wrong with him.

Static poured down all around them, the radio was so loud — emitting a slow, steady, droning pulse, and it was so *red* down here, in the warm red ice. How was it so red?

It was like Tom Clancy, Todd thought all of a sudden; like *The Hunt For Red October,* where they had those submarines that only used red lights, so your eyes didn't have to adjust to the dark. He'd liked the books when he'd read them. Serena called them 'dad fiction'.

He was going to find them. Wick and Serena. He… he had to.

His chest hurt. Must be his heart, pounding, he figured — but why? He wasn't scared, was he? He wasn't.

Why wasn't he scared?

* * *

June opened the door to the bar. A white sheet on a coat hanger swung out, and she flinched.

"Terrance is out," Anthea said, matter-of-factly.

"So you're in charge here?" June asked, tentative.

"I am never *not*," Anthea answered smartly. "Observe my warding spirit."

She pointed to the unconvincing hanger.

"Oh, yeah, it's great. In the season of things," June remarked.

It was a cute little ghost. June liked it, really, though she couldn't help but wonder why Anthea had rigged the thing to swing outwards.

Anthea placed a large pumpkin on the bartop, and placed a knife in its centre, beginning to carve.

"I should have done this earlier," she stated. "Tradition is an important aspect of any magick arsenal. Spirits have been warded off by these devices for hundreds of years. Their creators were wise."

June thought about this. She supposed it made sense. After all, if ghosts, monsters and dark spirits never visited houses with Halloween decorations, it would explain their absence during the festivities.

And maybe you needed them even more in Avenue. She had, after all… *seen* things, lately. She'd nearly died on the road in the middle of nowhere, and still, this sceptical feeling in her heart continued to tick. She was no scientist, but at the same time — why couldn't she just *believe* in this sort of thing? Part of her stubbornly felt as if this was all a very long dream.

Anthea placed a hand on her shoulder.

"We will be well," Anthea said, and although June had never really liked Anthea that much, she absolutely believed it.

* * *

Todd felt dreadfully awkward. Like he was imposing himself, really. It was such a quiet moment, the bearded man stepping into himself, into the corpse, to die. It was soft, personal. A thing that should have been his to share with someone that mattered to him — his final moments! Shouldn't he have been with his family, his friends? His mother, his father, his lover, anyone? Anyone but him? He just felt so in the way.

And despite that, it didn't feel like a death at all. He couldn't bring himself to feel cut-up over it; surely stepping into your own corpse was some sort of intentional rescission. *Just one of those things you do.*

To be sure, Todd would have agreed that it at the very least bordered upon the idiosyncratic, even by the standards of Avenue; but then again, he *was* a man abroad. Strange customs were to be expected.

* * *

"I'm not sure I can keep doing this, Liam," her shrill voice squeaked out. "I went to the store today — you know, the little crappy one out by the gas place, and — oh golly, Liam, the whole place gives me the heebie jeebies. It's empty, Liam."

Liam stared impassively at the wall. He was as still as stone.

"I just don't know how we're meant to get *by* here," she said, turning a finger around her bleached-blonde hair. A clump of it came off in her hand — she didn't see it. "The new house takes so much work. There aren't any proper grocery stores, just these little places where they sell chips. I can't get by with chips. I can't do my cooking. You love me for my cooking, and if I can't do it, then, well, what am I? *Tell* me, Liam."

Liam's back was still to her. She could see the hairs on the back of his neck, gnarled and misshapen, knotted around little pimples.

"People just keep going without so much as a by-your-leave, and I simply can't tolerate it. I'm near the end, Liam. I don't see a point to any of it here. Why'd we have to end up here? Couldn't we have just moved?"

Liam just kept looking.

"Tell me. Tell me anything. I need you. I can't get by without you. You're the last. The only thing that keeps me… If I don't have you anymore, I'll hurt myself, Liam."

And yet there was still no response. She came over to him, knelt by his stool that so implacably faced the wall. Placed her face in front of his eyes, so he *had* to look, to stop with this damned catatonia.

"Won't you please listen to me? Can't you say anything?"

And yet he was still.

* * *

Todd found his way back to the radio.

It had seemed important at the time, and he'd found no other paths forward, physical or otherwise. There was practically no sign of humanity down here. This was more than some missing persons case that he had just happened to get involved in. It was like Wick and Serena had disintegrated.

There *had* to be evidence, something for his mind to get its hooks into. There had to be some point, some reason why Anthea had asked *him* to investigate. Some reason why he had to be responsible.

No one asked him to do anything.

The same questions, over and over: perhaps that was it. Going up against the same problem, time and again. He was *used* to persistent problems. 13 Across. Five Letters.

But still.

Still.

The radio hummed its electronic fizzle as he stepped closer. Perhaps 'hummed' wasn't the correct word, though the noise was slow and droning. It was such a pained, desperate, offensive-sounding noise, that 'hissed' seemed more appropriate — the hiss of steam, of an overcooked stew about to boil over and flip the lid. Perhaps he might even go as far as 'gurgled'. Todd clutched at his ears.

He reached down to the radio to adjust the volume, the station, *anything*, but the thing stung to the touch, leaving a small, red-black burn in a hash-mark pattern at the top of his fingertip. He yelped in pain, but tried again, irrationally undeterred, to adjust the volume module — though this time, he at least had the good sense to put a pebble between his finger and the scalding material.

It was then that the strangest chanting began, the sound clearer by far than before:

It's in the old things, it went. *The abandoned things.*

The things left below and beneath, in refuse of landfills and stone of graveyards.

And the modems of computers, the lumbering kind that used to take up rooms.

It's in what you leave behind, forgotten toasters and never-read books.

It's getting closer.

The volume did not decrease or increase. It remained.

A red hole began to reveal itself in the centre of the radio, every other second. If you blinked, you could miss it, but it flickered into being, a deep, red, fiery abyss that was greater than the radio itself, located within the hole in the radio.

The hole was not too large. It was not *in* the radio, but perhaps *on* the radio. It was a screaming crevasse, blaring out static and little sparks and flickers. It was strange in shape, almost yonic, and despite this, immensely concerning to look at. Although it was not large, less than the size of the little boombox itself, you could certainly climb in. It seemed to want you to know that.

Well, Todd did *not* want to climb in. He had a strong inkling that the crevice would do something dreadful to him. Eat him or erase him or burn him and sting him and stab him forever.

Get in, loser. We're going shopping.

As Todd tried to turn and run away from the gaping maw, it increased in size, a crack in the universe that was bearing down on him, a red line that wanted to swallow everyone whole.

And then he was gone.

* * *

The bar was painted in the flickering, orange light of the Jack O'Lanterns, carefully positioned as part of Anthea's strange ritual. Outside the window, autumn leaves were blowing off their native branches, losing themselves in the night's faint darkness. There were no children laughing in the streets. There were hardly any people, and no trick-or-treaters at all.

That saddened June, somehow. She hadn't any special seasonal clothes or, really, *anything* special to wear, but she had hoped Avenue would have gone all-out for Halloween. She felt that if any town would, it would be a morose one like this… But then again, this was, as Anthea had so often said, a place of stagnation.

There was something wrong in the air. The emptiness was part of it. *Where was everyone…?* She tried to brush it off, but inevitably, she still had to ask.

"So, where are they?" June asked. "Wick, Serena? How've they been?"

Anthea tried to dodge the question by placing a pointy witch hat on her forehead and posing. Which was when June immediately knew something was wrong. Quite wrong.

"Where are they?" June asked once more, making sure that Anthea could hear the anger in her voice.

"They are," Anthea relented, her voice sounding incredibly pained, "in something that will kill them if they realise what it is. And we must keep going."

"What do you mean?!" June snapped. "You can't just say that! Why are we *here,* when we could —"

"*It* has many fuels. Knowledge is a fuel for it, but sorrow, anger, too."

"Oh, great. They're in danger and I can't feel anything about it, that's real helpful."

"Do not worry. I have sent the least-feeling, the least knowledgeable person I know. He will succeed, if success is possible."

June thought for a moment about this. "You've got to be kidding me. Todd?"

Anthea shrugged. "He usually sits and does crosswords and sudoku. Drinks tea. I've never seen him react to anything."

June preemptively placed her head in her hands; she could almost *feel* the migraine this was all going to give her. "Oh my *God*, Anthea," she moaned. "He's just some guy! He's not *emotionless!"*

"Isn't he?" God help her, Anthea seemed genuinely surprised at the statement. "He hardly reacts to anything. Sits alone. Drinks tea."

"He's *British,"* June cried out in frustrated desperation.

Anthea did not flinch; nor, for that matter, respond in any meaningful way. She didn't so much as acknowledge her failure.

"We shall have to hope, then. Many, whether he knows it or not, now stand on his shoulders."

June sighed as Anthea handed her an ancient-looking angel costume, left in decayed plastic wrap. This was going to be a long night.

* * *

The Redline was vast. Todd felt it.

He didn't feel it anywhere in particular, of course, because it wasn't physical, *per se*. He was no longer solid. His body — head, fingers, knees, toes, everything — they weren't there. But *he* was there, and he had some sense of the space around him.

He buckled with the sound around him, it shook every part of him, every part of him that wasn't here at all but still was.

He sank down below, into the vast red sea that surrounded him. Not that there was anything below, not in the conventional sense of the word 'thing'. There weren't any human terms for what he was doing. He was bodiless in something that wasn't quite fluid, wasn't quite solid at all.

Below, however, for some value of the word — below, bodies lay. As much as they could. They were like him. They had no arms, legs, anything, but he could still innately recognise them as people. Dead people, as the case may be.

UNDERSTANDING IS ERASURE, one of them rasped out, and the world shook from the vibrations of the words.

WHAT DO YOU MEAN, Todd asked, the world shaking from the vibrations of his own.

NO, NO, NO, NO, NO, NO, the hundreds of rasping, screaming figures that weren't figures implored, each one of them begging him not to ask in their own voice. NO, NO, NO, a thousand different voices spoke, pleading in this strange pitless pit.

There was no sight, no smell, no taste, no touch, but Todd felt the recognition.

He didn't speak further. He didn't want to upset them, poor devils.

Mind you — could they even *be* upset, the dead things? How could anyone react to an experience so… alien? He himself couldn't say he was feeling much at the moment.

He didn't feel much these days.

He *could* just float down and be with the others.

But there was something else.

In the corner (there was no corner) there was a wailing woman, with her husband beside her (beside wasn't the right word). She was calling out to him, begging, over and over, in static reprisal.

"Come on, talk to me, Liam. I need to hear your voice! I need to be with you again!"

Further afield, there was a chair. It was a comfortable-looking chair. But it wasn't quite right. It didn't fit with everything else here, all textureless and ephemeral. It was just a coffee chair. Lumpy with age.

Back down, the wailing spirits wrenched and buckled in agony. Screaming for what they could not have.

He felt them drawing him closer as they begged for him to get away.

What was he? Was he a fish? A word in a book? Vibrations in the air? A radio? Yes, that had to be it. He was inside the radio, he was *in* the signal. In the Redline. What would the signal do?

They were getting closer.

There was a whispering from the depths.

Come on. You're so close to solving it. You've nearly figured it out.

UNDERSTANDING IS ERASURE, the others tried to tell him again, but he was quite simply not listening. Something else brought him back from the brink.

Remembering.

The questions died down when he remembered. And it was such a sudden thing, the remembering. He was not usually an anchorless presence in a red nothing. And he had come here for a reason. He had a purpose. A quest. The first time anyone had believed in him, maybe.

And there was something else about him too. He didn't feel much, but he felt about others. He felt strongly about dependability. The importance of it. He was a good friend. He was *here* to *do something*. Not to solve a mystery, but to help people. He was someone who would have your back when you asked. He might complain, but he would do it, as surely as the Sun would rise and set.

It was a spiritual thing, maybe. There was a bit of that to it. Because he could feel the vibrations. He was not, he was certain, *comfortably* numb.

He drifted down — below, beneath, into the declination, descending and plummeting. But not aimless, and not towards oblivion.

Before he hit the end where it could have him, he stopped.

He grabbed two signals — two bodies, once — from the mass of screaming radio flesh. They were held down by sinewy cartilage made of signal, some sort of radio transmission. Some sports station, an audio drama, or Chappell Roan, he didn't care. He tugged at the signal until it snapped. A

rogue claw of Creedence Clearwater Revival on 102.7 FM swiped at him. A near miss — just luck, really.

He knew he had the right signals. They were the only ones not crying. They, like him, were unlucky and new. There was a familiarity he could not discount. And they were nearly free.

He clung onto them as they went up towards that which wasn't quite the light — because there really hardly was any direction at all. The warbling tuning noise of the stations struggling to connect to him surrounded them as they wiggled up and out of the red, bursting out of the red icy crystal and into reality.

He was in the cave where he had begun, not an electrical impulse in the radio, but not yet in his own body, which he could see lying on the floor.

His shirt had been torn open, revealing his slightly flabby chest, and the radio signal desperately attempting to finish the carving of the triangular sigil it had worked into his chest.

It was moving so slowly — as though it was having trouble with the precise nature of its appointed task.

Todd moved quickly. He climbed back into his body —

* * *

— and then the signal was gone. It was amazingly simple. Instinctive. Like opening and stepping out of a door. As he reclaimed the body, the Redline signal could no longer manage to continue to carve.

Wick and Serena were behind him. He had known they would be, but he was still surprised. Just a little.

Their bodies had been stored in the signal. Nothing like the way his body had been left here. *Honestly!* Nothing about today made *any* sense. Todd felt a twinge — the familiar, quintessentially British and utterly irrelevant urge to find somebody with whom to register a complaint.

"We have to get out of here," he said instead. "Are you two all right?"

For just a moment, Serena stuttered out something about going to the Moon. But then she brought herself back. She nodded. Wick nodded.

Things were fine.

And it was just a cave.

* * *

There was no red crystalline ice on the way out, there were no strange carvings on the walls, and ominous notebooks half-buried in rock dust were nowhere to be found. The walls were less tight. It seemed as though there hadn't been a cave-in. And Todd —

Todd felt like himself for the first time in years.

Oh, his chest stung and ached. There were two very deep cuts on his chest. Two sides of a triangle. But he didn't mind, or at any rate not completely; after all, it was his only proof that this whole thing hadn't been a bad dream.

He really should have been upset. He should have been hysterical, driven halfway to distraction by all the horrors he'd seen. So he kept telling himself. He knew that most people would be, should be, under the circumstances. He really, really should be.

And yet, with his friends back by his side — well, his acquaintances; *were* they friends? Had they been to start with? If not, were they now? Whatever they were to him, he found it hard to feel anything but relief now that he had them back. No, he couldn't feel anything about anything else at all.

That really should have concerned him, he mused. The whole 'not really feeling things' thing. And yet —

He remembered his mother smiling at him with her hair in a done-up bun and her clothes the Sunday best.

"Keep calm and carry on," she had commanded him.

Was that really all he'd been doing for all these years?

He didn't know.

Outside, on the street, there were people. There was the amber light of the street-lamps, little crowds forming at houses and trying to get into bars. He heard children laughing. "Trick-or-treat," they exclaimed, every so often, in giddy tones like happy parrots. "Trick-or-treat!" All one word, almost a magic spell for the summoning of candy — no longer caring that it was supposed to be a question. Trick *or* treat. As an Englishman and a classically-trained linguist, Todd should have disapproved of the ignorance of proper grammar, but he found he didn't care.

Children roaming Avenue's streets. All of them dressed up in their little superhero costumes. Todd remembered a time when Halloween had been about — what it was. Not a night for heroes and cosplay, but little ghosts and witches. Foul villainy had prowled on this night. Back in the day. But even then, it had been two parts mischief, one part malice, at most.

Maybe it's a good thing they haven't seen what I have, he thought to himself. *Halloween's only a day for <u>little</u> nightmares, after all.*

* * *

The bar was packed. There were Halloween costumes everywhere, and Jack O'Lanterns, and music. Anthea had done up the place astonishingly well.

There were people. Adeline was up on that little stage, singing the *Monster Mash*, and Billings was getting a drink from Terrance at the bar. Rocko was dressed up like a mummy; Cherry was a bloodstained bride. There was activity, laughter, joy. It was nothing like what Todd had been expecting.

He didn't want to be dour, to spoil the mood, ruin the holiday. Wick had run back in, trying to get into his costume; it was as though nothing had changed. But Serena had stayed close by.

Part of Todd, despite it all, still felt trapped. Still down in the mine. And despite Wick running off, he could see that in them too.

"Do you remember what happened?" he asked Serena.

She thought for just a second.

"A little," she said. "I knew what was happening, for a moment… I knew what was happening." She let the sentence linger, as if longing to recapture that feeling. "…And then I forgot."

* * *

"Thank you," Anthea said, softly, opening the door to her office. "You've done more than I had hoped."

Todd nodded. "I didn't have much of a choice. It was the right thing to do."

Anthea's mouth curled into a little smile. "It is extraordinary that you view it that simply."

Todd shrugged. He felt restless, as though this wasn't how it was meant to be. An altogether improper ending, akin to reaching the end of a book when you'd thought it would go on for twenty more pages, which turn out to be nothing but author's notes. An anticlimax, a rushed conclusion. Why did he feel that way? Surely he wasn't so gauche as to actually think of his own life in narrative terms. It had just been a very strange day.

"I was not sure," Anthea said, her voice low, and raw, "that I would ever get them back. I really must thank you."

Todd didn't feel anything. "Yes. Er, quite. Mh."

"You stepped up when no one else could. If I or June had…" Her voice trailed off. There were things she was not saying.

"If you or June had gone there," Todd began in turn, "you would have —"

"Careful!" Anthea shouted, cutting him off. "Careful. I have some of the pieces, you have some of the pieces. If we put them together, if one *understands it* —"

Todd nodded. There was a hollowness in his chest. "As long as everyone's safe."

"The haunt's been dealt with for now," Anthea stated, a little more information slipping out than she meant.

Todd pretended not to notice. He was very tired, and glad that the world had started up again. As it was meant to. Avenue had blinked for a moment, and then it was well. A brief bout of fibrillation, that was all.

"Will you need my help again?" Todd asked.

"I don't expect so."

* * *

Todd wandered back to his apartment. It was close. It was small. Undignified. People thought his torn shirt, the dirt on him, his cuts, were a costume. That he had deliberately shredded one of his favourite items of clothing to embody 'Zombie Todd'. The idea! They laughed as he walked by, and he had to remind himself that they thought themselves to be laughing *with* him, not *at* him.

He went up the wooden stairs behind the laundromat to his little inlet; then he took the key-fob from his pocket and opened the door, trudging back into his rubbish room.

It was all he could afford — there was a lumpy mattress on the floor and a bathroom that was a closet that had a toilet put in it.

It's funny what makes you feel things, he thought to himself.

He'd seen some truly awful things today, but it hardly meant he had *felt* those things. This was not the same. He felt this room to the bone. It was why he spent his time in that bar, draining his money with his tea, his crosswords, his sudoku and his beer. Just a few minutes away from this fucking apartment. Every time he stepped in here, he wanted to scream, to yell, and to let the whole world know how miserable he was.

Aye, but the neighbours might hear. And they all thought he was *such* a lovely man. A normal man. Just an innocent man. They'd point him out to the children.

"Mister Todd's a nice fellow. Keep up your work at school and you can end up like Mister Todd."

He slammed himself onto the lumpy mattress. The sooner he fell asleep the less he'd have to think about this little room with its mouldy orange walls.

That was the theory, in any case. As always, the moment he squeezed his eyes shut and pressed himself into the pillow, the thoughts came, unbidden, rummaging in his head. Questions, today, in the main. What had he seen today? What was a haunt? Who was that man? Who was Liam?

He brushed them aside. He wasn't *meant* to think about that stuff. It was dangerous to think about that stuff. *Really* dangerous.

But he wanted to know. *Damn,* he wanted to know.

Staring at the ceiling, he thought for a split second that the mouldy orange walls were, ever so briefly, red.

Trick of the shadows, trick of the light.

After all, it was the witching hour.

* * *

It's shaped like a heart and it touches the sky and I mean it when I say that, it touches the sky. You may think that that's not a thing, that the sky is the atmosphere, and it's up there, an abstract idea not ever touched by anyone, but here, there is an end to the sky. It's not beating, the heart. It doesn't need to. After all, it's not connected to anything. But it *is* alive, and it's there. And sometimes it's something else. A church. Not your church. Not for a particular religion, not one you would know. But a place you pray in. It's little, and it's friendly, and it's full. The church, unlike the heart, is beating. It's flushed with slow steady, monotonous movement. *Come back,* it says. *Come back in us.* God yes. There is a yearning to it. Don't you feel that yearning too, Todd? Do you think you're different now, that you've proved yourself? That you're just like everyone else? You shouldn't think that. You know you're not. You know you're lesser. You can help them still if you solve it. If you figure out what I am. Know that I'm here. Clamber into my sullen walls and revel in me. When you know, you will be complete. You will have the answers. And you will be with me.